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VIETNAM

The Refugees

Lost Dreams and Mourning

Many Prosper Here, but Others Are Mired in Poverty

By John Mintz
Washington Post Staff Writer

Doan Ngoc An is a boss' dream. The 35-year-old Vietnamese refugee is known as a tireless worker at the Beltsville electroplating plant where he works the 4 p.m. to midnight shift. He goes home, sleeps for three hours, and then gets up at 6 a.m. for his second job, delivering newspapers.

An, who arrived in this country in 1980, seems to be the epitome of industriousness that Americans point to in their praise of Vietnamese refugees.

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Guilty About Freedom

Many Vietnamese are still preoccupied with life in their homeland. Most refugees send money and goods to impoverished relatives there, and anxiously wait for word back. "They feel guilty they have freedom and security, and there are so many relying on them back home," said Yen Do, editor of a Vietnamese newspaper in Orange County. "They can never get away

from their oppressors. It will follow them for their whole lives."

Reluctance to break those ties is thought to be a reason why only 16 percent of the Indochinese refugees who are eligible have become citizens. And Vietnamese say that political involvement is discouraged by an atmosphere of distrust found at all levels of their society here.

The Vietnamese communities are severely split by factions with, for example, former Army officers criticizing their counterparts from the Navy, reformers against the old line, class against class, and on and on. The exile press is filled with accusations that one or another leader is a "Hanoi henchman," a "puppet" of corrupt South Vietnamese generals, a CIA agent or a sellout to the Americans.

Vietnamese widely believe that Communists have infiltrated the refugees here. Many claim that details of secret meetings of anti-Hanoi groups have appeared in radio broadcasts in Vietnam. Fed-

eral law enforcement officials say they also believe the Vietnamese communities are shot through with spies.

"We come from a war-torn society," said Yen. "It's in the nature of things, the secrets, the divisions."

This atmosphere of intrigue surrounds the activities of the shadowy but apparently active resistance movement that aims to overthrow the Hanoi government. There are more than 50 such competing organizations here, and many issue harsh condemnations of one another.

Despite the infighting, almost all Vietnamese here support the aims of the resistance. It is almost a rite of adolescence for many male Vietnamese teen-agers to talk about returning to Vietnam to fight the Communists.

Yet Vietnamese youths also acknowledge their futures are not in Vietnam, but in the United States. Their parents know that their children, for better or worse, have been caught up in the American dream.

"I'm on the track team, I run the 880 relay, the mile relay and the 85-meter dash," said Thu-Nga Hoang, a lithe 16-year-old girl who is a straight-A sophomore at J.E.B. Stuart High School. "I play in the orchestra, first chair, second violin; I'm in the French club, the science club, the international club."

Thu-Nga cannot remember the name of the town in Vietnam that she left at age 6 with her family, and has forgotten Vietnamese, but she's confident about her life here. "I really think I'm going to be able to do whatever I set out to do," she said. "I think it's going to be strict studying until I reach my goal."